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ABSTRACT

The current practice and theory of preparing college teachers of writing can benefit greatly by considering the history of writing teacher education as practiced in this country since at least 1894. Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts) offered the first course for new teachers of writing in 1912, and in the early years of this century, occasional calls for better graduate training programs were made in articles published in "English Journal." However, in the 1940s, 1950s, and the 1960s, few beginning teachers were even given such essential ingredients as course syllabi, office space, or any training for their first course as instructors. By the end of the 1960s, the newly-formed field of composition studies began to develop increasing influence in teacher preparation. But it was in the 1950s that secondary English education was transformed into the triad of language, literature, and composition, a move that ended up greatly affecting the way graduate students were trained to teach. The great wave of war veterans who entered American universities in the late 'forties and 'fifties had sudden impact in how composition was to be taught. The same questions being asked today were addressed during the crucial transition period of the 1950s: questions about methods, curricula, texts, assessment, and management. How teachers in the 'fifties answered these and other questions is instructive to today's professionals, and in fact profoundly changed the field. Further, a new interest in research and the theory of composition studies forever changed the way new instructors were trained. (Contains 21 references.) (HB)

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A Short History of Graduate Preparation of Writing Teachers

If you think the phenomenon of the graduate teaching assistant in English departments is recent, you will be surprised to know that graduate students assisted instructors in reading themes as early as 1894, when the weekly themes of nearly 1200 University of Michigan students were corrected by a staff of four full-time teachers and two graduate students (Kitzhaber 44).

And if you have been part of the debate about how to prepare graduate students, you may be interested in knowing that that debate began nearly a hundred years ago, as evidenced in the results of a 1900 MLA survey: The majority of respondents to the survey favored graduate level study of rhetoric. Some respondents believed that future instructors should be trained in the methods of teaching rhetoric, including practical exercise in composition, though some argued that "such practice shouldn't be included in degree requirements" (Stewart 740).

The first course for new teachers of college writing was offered at Harvard in 1912 to candidates for apprenticeships in freshman composition. Half of the course was based on the professor's belief that "[T]he chief requisite for success in teaching freshmen to write is to be able to write everything that a Freshman would be required to write . . ."

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(Greenough 110). Therefore, English graduate students critiqued class members' theses and reports for other courses or pieces about outside interests, and they revised reports and theses from previous years.

The other half of the work was about pedagogy in writing. The assignments are worth noting here because they target problems that continue to vex methods teachers today and they introduce some recurring themes in the history of TA training. For one project, each graduate student read the themes of ten freshmen in search of errors which he recorded in a notebook. Each month he classified the errors, thus preparing himself for the kinds of problems he would face in his own future composition classes. For a second assignment, practice in critiquing manuscripts, the graduate students commented on typical freshmen themes that the department had commercially printed. In addition, they observed classes of experienced teachers, wrote lectures for an imaginary freshman class which they presented to their classmates for discussion, and simulated the conference situation by going over with the course instructor the themes of their ten freshmen. They also met weekly for informal sessions on practical matters like textbook selection and how to get other courses to require better written work (115).

In English Journal articles from the early decades of the nineteen hundreds we find occasional calls for better graduate training programs, but programs themselves were rare. In a 1916 address, for instance, J. V. Denney, the chair of the English department at Ohio State University, proposed a course for prospective college English teachers to help them identify the aims (and necessity) for freshman courses, to demonstrate how new developments in psychology could affect teaching practices, to determine the content of the freshman writing courses, the sequence of assignments, and placement procedures, and to discuss conferencing,

writing across the disciplines, the teaching of grammar, and assessment. Yet, if contemporary professional journals are a fair indicator of teacher preparation programs, few universities took up Denney's call. In fact, new teaching assistants attending Denney's own institution in 1946 were given a text, a class schedule, a syllabus, and a desk in a large office with the other teaching assistants.

While the 1946 OSU experience is echoed in accounts of others who entered our profession in the mid-forties, some college teachers I have interviewed do recall class visits from supervisors and informal discussions, usually about grading. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that that initiation into the profession was typical of the preparation of thousands of graduate students in the forties and fifties, and, indeed, the sixties. For example, at a major mid-west university in 1960, David Foster, the author of A Primer for Writing Teachers: Theories, Theorists, Issues, Problems and instructor of new TAs at Drake University for a couple of decades, entered the profession in this manner:

> I was handed a syllabus in which error-correction figured prominently. I had had no training in teaching writing; I was innocent of any grasp of the psychological and linguistic dimension of writing; and I had no familiarity with any classroom strategies. Moreover, we TAs . . . had no hand in planning the syllabus or making any of the pedagogical choices that might have taught us something about the craft of writing.
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> . . .
>
> Most of us were indifferent to the process of composing; it was something one did in order to get a grade, a chore that we had learned to handle because we were English majors.

> Possessing some modest language ability ourselves, most of us failed to grasp how difficult and complex writing is or how to help other students a few years younger learn to compose in a course directed mostly at grammar and editing skills. We failed to teach, and the students mostly failed to learn, or learned despite us. Behind us loomed the larger failure of the institution . . . to create genuine learning opportunities for undergraduates by helping its graduates--their frontline teachers--learn about their discipline. (Foster n.p.)

Around the time of Foster's graduate work, the embryonic discipline of composition began to influence TA preparation. By any number of criteria, we can mark the sixties as the beginning of the modern field of composition, a pivotal decade for a new discipline. It was in the sixties that Moffett's Teaching the Universe of Discourse (1968) and Corbett's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student (1965) appeared. It was in the sixties that NCTE authorized a permanent commission on composition, that College English (1969) devoted an entire issue to composition, that the Dartmouth Conference (1966) was convened, that Emig, studying the writing processes of twelfth graders, legitimized case study and protocol analysis as research techniques in composition, that Kitzhaber published Themes, Theories, and Therapies: The Teaching of Writing in College (1963), that Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer published Research in Written Composition (1963).

But it is the fifties that I want to focus on now, for that decade was one of academic reform in English. I refer you to Applebee's Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English and the NCTE Yearbook Consensus and Dissent: Teaching English--Past, Present, and Future for details about what was primarily a reform in secondary education. But the new view of

English studies as language, literature, and composition affected TA preparation. For one thing, viewing English studies as a triad led some college teachers to see that TAs needed more than just training in methods. They needed the theory that grounded the methods for teaching freshman composition.

The period immediately before and after World War 11 holds some fascination for those of us interested in TA preparation because English studies were changed dramatically with the admission into undergraduate and graduate programs of over 2 million G. I. Bill students. The academic and administrative changes required to accommodate the GIs, who, unlike their predecessors, were from varied economic, social, and academic backgrounds, were monumental. Accounts like Keith Olson's The G. I Bill, the Veterans, and the Colleges show that veterans distinguished themselves by their numbers, their maturity, and their achievement. However, little has been written about how those new freshmen composition students effected change in composition programs. Even less has been written about the veterans who enrolled in graduate English programs that were responsible for the teaching of freshman English. Thus, the fifties is the focus of the rest of my paper.

I begin, then, with questions and answers about teaching freshman composition that are raised in contemporary College Composition and Communication and College English journals. These are the issues that shaped what happened in composition classes, and, per force, in graduate teacher training courses.

. What should students be writing about? In the fifties, freshman composition programs were in search of approaches that would give students something to write about. In a 1959 CCCC paper, a faculty member from Oregon College of Education captured the variety of roads to

that end: to stretch "the reach of students toward significant ideas of the modern world, [to] introduce them to the beauties and profundities of literature, [to] try to bend them to the appropriate posture for seeing in greater detail the configurations of their navels, [to] lift them to the rooftops to view the social patterns of their neighborhoods" (Bellamy 37).

. How should we deal with remedial students? Enrollment in remedial English made up thirty percent of the total composition enrollment in some schools, although respondents to a 1959 CCCC's survey of 75 universities indicated that remedial English had either been discontinued or would be in nearly half of their institutions (Cox et al 240).

. How can we deal with high enrollment? High enrollments forced schools to experiment with approaches to cope. In some places, large sections of composition were taught through televised lectures, in others through large lecture classes and small discussion groups, and in others through supplementary services such as writing labs and tutorial programs (Cox et al 242).

. How do we grade themes? This question dominated the list of concerns, as it had since the turn of the century and as it continues to do today (although we now "respond" to papers rather than "grade" them). In some cases, it was hoped that uniformity in theme-grading would standardize the many sections of freshman comp. In many cases, theme-grading was the teacher's most important pedagogical tool. Charles Roberts, who introduced a one-credit course called "The Theory and Practice of English Composition" at the University of Illinois, said: "I have come to the conclusion that the backbone of any respectable course in either composition or communication is the careful, considerate, and constructive criticism of the students' writing efforts" (193). So central

to writing programs was the grading of papers that one remedy which called for instructors to return unread those papers not written in Standard English, allowing students to resubmit them for grades but no comments or analysis, was called "innovative" (Stevick 236).

. How do we teach grammar? There was a great deal of confusion about what grammar is and disagreement about what to do with it, whatever it is. In general, there was agreement in some basic attitudes toward grammar and its place in the composition/communication course: Many teachers distrusted the approach of a series of rules, and they rejected emphasis on the traditional parts of speech, emphasizing instead structure (sentence patterns) as the basis of grammatical study. ("Grammar in the Composition/Communication Course: What Kind and How Much?"). Structural linguistics, it was believed, would help writers learn about the structure of language. Knowledge of language structure would help them learn about the structure of discourse. That knowledge, in turn, would help them become better writers.

. What texts should we use? That was an important question because then, as now, a text could drive an entire program. The textbooks of the fifties reflected the fact that Freshman English, once the same wherever one went, changed from year to year and college to college. Henry F. Thoma, a former English teacher who became a Houghton Mifflin editor, told a 1956 CCCC session that there were three post-war influences on texts: semantics, which had been around since the thirties but had been left out of texts because war shortages prevented the publication of new texts, saw a renewed interest in post-war colleges because of propaganda analysis. (When I began undergraduate work in 1956, my first composition text was Hayakawa's Language in Thought and Action, so I know first-hand that "Symbols and referents were

everywhere, and an abstraction ladder grew from every bush," (37) to borrow Thoma's words. Modern linguistics had its affect also, although prescriptive linguistics had strong support (as, indeed, it has today in some places). However, fewer handbooks and rhetorics were strictly prescriptive. The third influence was communication, which promoted the idea that there are fundamental skills basic to reading, writing, speaking, and listening. As an undergraduate, my methods text (I think it was by Pooley) showed me how to do unit plans that integrated all the language skills so that each reinforced the others.

During the fifties the seeds were planted, as I have already noted, for ways to look at writing and the teaching of writing. For instance, in a 1953 College English article, Barris Mills introduced the notion of writing as process. Mills said, ". . . the basic failure in our teaching centers . . . is our unwillingness or incapacity to think of writing in terms of process. Too many teachers, in spite of new developments in pedagogy, still think of communication in terms that are static, atomistic, nonfunctional." Semantics, scientific linguistics, and propaganda analysis, popular developments of the fifties, are all based on the concept of process (Mills 19).

For the first time, there was talk about pedagogical research. Is there any correlation between study of grammar and improvement of writing (Grammar in the Composition/Communication Course: What Kind of How Much?") Does class size really make a difference? How do practicing writers write? Shouldn't classroom teachers be conducting research? Shouldn't there be more latitude in the kinds of research acceptable for dissertation studies?

There was talk about graduate curriculum change. A 1959 CCCC workshop proposed that teachers of composition/communication take

courses in Modern English Grammar and English and American literature, considered critically as well as historically. In addition, the participants recommended that MA programs develop the candidate's ability to write through courses in advanced composition, critiqued course papers and well-supervised theses, or by a combination of methods ("Preparation of Composition/Communication Teachers: Toward a Comprehensive Program" 239). We tend to assume, William Riley Parker, a nine-year editor of PMLA, wrote, "without testing or training, that all beginning instructors in English are persuasive speakers in a classroom, that they read well, and that they write clearly, correctly, and effectively. Well, it just isn't so!" . . . Graduate schools have not helped matters by acting as though no problem existed, . . . (197).

Administrators and experienced faculty, alert to the increases in enrollment anticipated for the sixties, began to acknowledge the need to prepare graduate students to teach writing, despite the prevailing attitude that teaching writing was just something new teachers did until they got to teach literature. An instructor of Duke University's graduate preparation course in the fifties put it this way: "When, and if, the freshman composition course acquires the professional respect it deserves, then, and only then, will graduate students entertain a genuine respect for a training course for teachers of freshman composition" (Hunting 6).

As you can tell from my citations, these seeds of change were nurtured by the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Begun in 1949 and growing rapidly in the fifties, the organization provided forums for discussions about issues in the teaching of writing through its spring conferences and its publication College Composition and Communication.

What kinds of training courses evolved from the fifties? By 1960 some innovative ideas were in operation in some English departments. For instance, the University of Illinois course I mentioned had by 1955 evolved into a solid course in which, in addition to practice in the close reading of students' texts (still known as "grading"), graduate students observed a freshman composition class taught by an experienced teacher and studied several of the students in the class, noting their participation and examining their written work. A second hour was added to the course so that the observers, the graduate course instructor, and the freshman composition teacher could discuss the activities in the class that been observed. This course, however, was optional.

The graduate course that may be the model for the 1960s and 70s courses in which current rhetorical and pedagogical theories were introduced was Albert Kitzhaber's "Rhetorical Background of Written English." Offered first in 1950, the University of Kansas course grew out of the need for experienced writing teachers, but the University wanted to help beginning teachers "form the same sort of professional attitude toward the teaching of composition as they already [had] toward the teaching of literature" (196). New teachers met two hours every other week, the first hour devoted to lectures on the announced topic, the second hour to a discussion of the practical applications of the theoretical material presented in the lecture (196). To give you a sense of the new ground that was broken in this course, here is the list of the biweekly topics: During the first semester, rhetorical traditions, British rhetoric of the 18th century, 19th century American tradition, psychology and rhetoric, linguistics and rhetoric, grammar and usage, punctuation, and paragraphs were covered. During the second semester, literary theory, English prose style, reading and grading compositions, subjects for

composition, semantics and rhetoric, rhetoric and logic, English placement exams, and various types of composition courses around the country were the topics. It is not hard to see that in this program grading papers was no longer privileged, although Kitzhaber does say that during the year there were several meetings in which all teachers brought in mimeographed papers they had graded and commented upon. In addition, the director of composition collected sets of themes from the new teachers and met with them to discuss the grades and comments.

I'll close by reiterating some of the themes that run through our history of TA preparation and that I continue to research. First, TA training is bound to the attitude of the academy toward freshman composition. Second, teacher preparation programs lag behind current knowledge of the discipline. Third, knowing the theoretical assumptions about writing and the teaching of writing is as important as knowing methods of teaching. Finally, through the decades, faculty have complained about graduate students' writing, recommending that they receive more practice.

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